Cross-Age Tutoring Guide
for Reading Achievement
in Elementary Schools

Start up a cross-age tutoring program in 6 simple steps!

The Meadows Center
FOR PREVENTING EDUCATIONAL RISK

Introduction

Schools are stretched thin in many ways. Given the lack of resources, large class sizes, and even the shift in some districts to a four-day school week, solutions are needed that provide all students with access to evidence-based instruction and individualized learning opportunities. One such approach is **cross-age tutoring**. This guide provides everything you need to get started!

What Is Cross-Age Tutoring?

Cross-age tutoring is a model in which an older student tutor (who can be in high school, middle school, or even elementary!) works with a younger student tutee to support their learning and growth. This model has demonstrated itself to be an efficacious approach to drive student learning and engagement (Leung, 2019; Shenderovich et al., 2016; Swanson et al., 2023).

How Can It Help My Students?

Cross-age tutoring provides benefits on the academic outcomes of both younger students (*tutees*) and older student (*tutors*). In fact, a recent study indicated that 4th and 5th grade tutors and 1st and 2nd grade tutees demonstrated growth in oral reading fluency after participating in cross-age tutoring lessons for 17 weeks (Swanson et al., 2023).

Figure 1: Cross-Age Tutors and Tutees: Oral Reading Fluency Growth
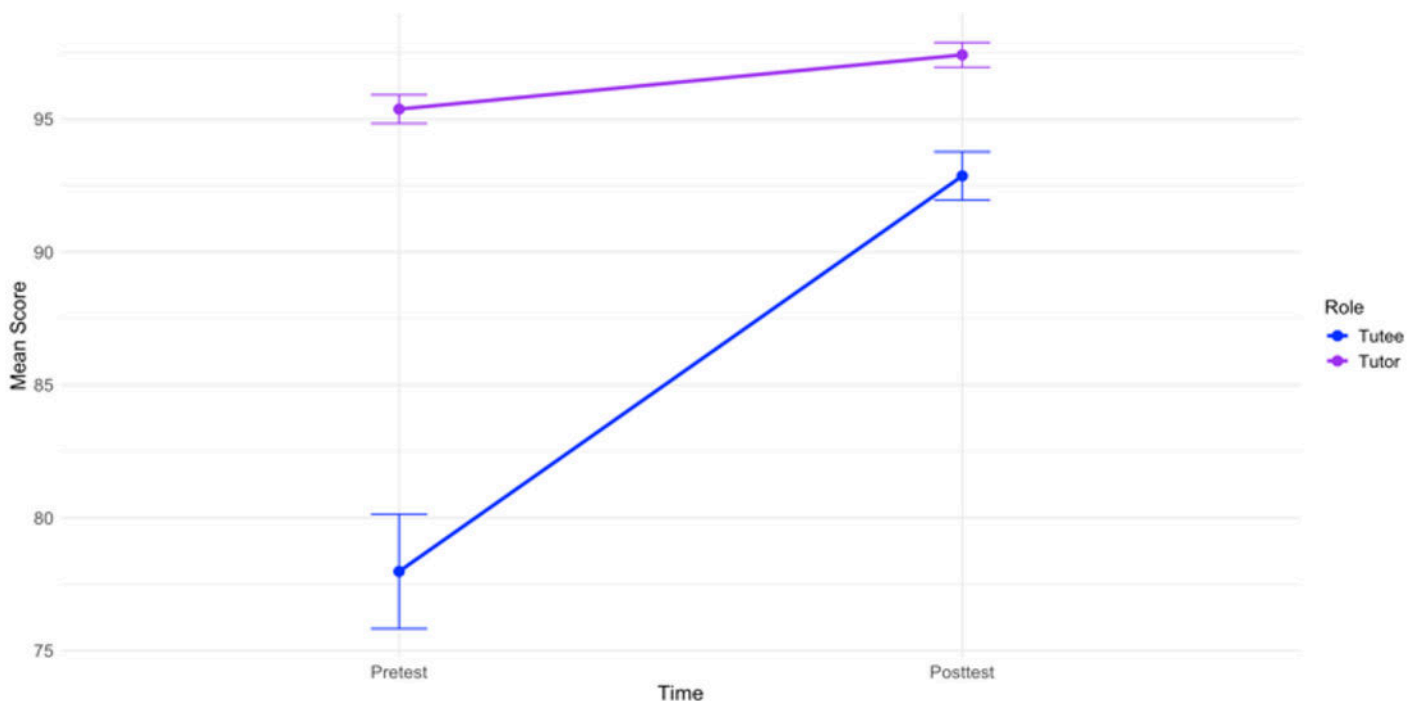
Note. 4th and 5th grade oral reading fluency naturally grows at a slower rate because, on average, it starts higher. The fact that 4th and 5th grade oral reading fluency improved is very impressive.

Let's Get Started!

The following are six steps to implement cross-age tutoring in your classroom.

1 Identify Program and Student Needs

Meet with your principal to ask if a systematic reading tutoring program for students in grades K–2 would be appropriate and valuable. Consider students in your classroom as well as those in the school as a whole. You know your students best. Below is a conversation guide with a few topics to introduce this idea with other school stakeholders.

"I am interested in collaborating to implement cross-age tutoring in our school . . ."

This learning model will provide students with an **individualized learning experience** using evidence-based materials.

Cross-age tutoring has demonstrated benefits on the **academic outcomes for both tutors and tutees**.

Cross-age tutoring can be implemented with **students of all ages**.

Cross-age tutoring can serve as a **powerful boost** for student reading growth.

2 Identify Evidence-Based Materials

Below are two programs designed for peer tutoring. These programs are already backed by research and demonstrate growth in academic skills for both tutors and tutees.

Sound Partners
https://www.voyagersopris.com/products/reading/sound-partners/overview

Sound Partners is a research-based tutoring program that targets beginning reading skills for students in the early elementary grades. As it targets early reading skills, Sound Partners is an excellent program option for students in elementary school to serve as both tutors and tutees. Sound Partners is a 1-to-1 intervention that provides individualized instruction and feedback to help them develop their decoding, phonemic awareness, spelling, and reading fluency.

Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS)
https://frg.vkcsites.org/what-is-pals/

PALS is a research-based tutoring program for both reading and mathematics. PALS has programs designed for students from elementary through high school. As such, it can be adapted for a vari-

ety of students to serve as both tutors and tutees. PALS is a 1-to-1 intervention designed to provide instruction and feedback to students in a way where both the tutor and tutee benefit. Although it can be used for cross-age tutoring, it can also be used when students are the same age or grade.

Additional Materials

If your school cannot purchase one of the programs above, below are two websites with tons of free resources that are appropriate for use with a wide range of grade levels.

- Florida Center for Reading Research
  https://fcrr.org/student-center-activities
- The University of Florida Literacy Institute
  https://ufli.education.ufl.edu/foundations/printable-resources

When Choosing a Resource, Consider the Following Questions

- ❏ Are lessons or activities **scripted** so tutors know what to say? Consider the reading level of the script. Is it appropriate for your students' grade level(s)?
- ❏ Are lessons or activities **simple** enough for student tutors to lead? Consider the training students might need to implement the lessons independently.
- ❏ Does the resource indicate **how long** will each lesson or activity take? Consider setting up a timer so students can manage their lesson time.
- ❏ Will this **fit** in our daily schedule? Consider where this program will work best in your schedule so students will be focused (e.g., before or after recess, right after snack).

How Can I Determine is a Resource is Evidence-Based?

Once you have found an appropriate resource, make sure that it is **evidence-based**. To easily check if a resource is evidence-based, use one of the following websites.

- **What Works Clearinghouse (WWC)**
  https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc
  WWC reviews all related research for different instructional programs or interventions and shares an effectiveness rating to indicate what works in education.
- **Best Evidence Encyclopedia (BEE)**
  https://bestevidence.org
  BEE provides helpful information about the strength of programs available for K–12 learning.
- **Evidence for ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act)**
  https://www.evidenceforessa.org
  The ESSA resource library lists up-to-date information on programs that meet ESSA evidence standards.

3 Create Tutoring Dyads

The success of your cross-age tutoring program will be influenced by how well students are paired. Take into account academic skill, how well students get along with one another, and if any students may be absent due to services at your chosen time of implementation. Also consider how teachers across different grade levels may buddy up to implement cross-age tutoring.

To pair students, consider the following:

Grade-Level Partnerships
You know your students and school best. Consider partnering with a teacher in another grade level or setting up a school-wide buddy program in which one grade level is consistently paired with another (i.e., 5th and 2nd, 4th and 1st, and 3rd and kindergarten).

General Level of Academic Skills
As you have access to students' academic skill levels, these may be a helpful guide to pairing students (Mauer & Swanson, 2024). In our study, we found that reducing the reading proficiency gap between the tutor and tutee is important. For example, we avoided putting the highest achieving tutor with the lowest achieving tutee. Instead, we matched the lower achieving older tutor with the lower achieving younger tutee.

Students' Gender
In prior studies, students in same-gender dyads yielded slightly larger outcomes as a result of cross-age tutoring compared to students in mixed-gender dyads (Leung, 2019). Try pairing students in same-gender dyads to the greatest extent possible.

Students' Language Background
Young children who are learning English as a second language and concurrently learning to read in English may need some extra support. One way to support learning for emergent bilingual students is to pair them with an older buddy who speaks the same home language.

General Cooperation
This is perhaps the most important component of all. Do the students in the dyad get along? You may think so until they're actually working together! Don't be afraid to switch partners so that everyone enjoys their time together.

Adjusting Student Dyads
If a dyad is having trouble working together, don't be afraid to switch partners. It may take a few weeks and a few changes to get the dyads just right.

By taking time to carefully create cross-age tutoring dyads, you are likely to see greater enjoyment—for the students and yourself—as well as strong academic benefits for both tutors and tutees.

4 Provide Training

A structured training is key to the success of your cross-age tutoring program. Access our **free online module** that includes video tutorials for afterschool leaders and student trainings at the following address: **https://meadowscenter.org/resource/cross-age-tutoring-toolkit/**

All the training components referenced below are covered in-depth in our trainings. Both traditional PowerPoint presentations and a RISE module (videos and interactive modules) are available.

Please refer the speaker notes in the PowerPoint files when conducting trainings with your students. If you choose to use the online modules, additional videos will explain the program to students, so your main role will be to facilitate and click through the presentations.

Below are components that will set up your students and site for success.

All Students
Highly Structured Training. When students participate in structured trainings, they (a) are more successful in implementing the program and (b) demonstrate larger academic gains (Leung, 2019). All trainings for cross-age tutoring should be structured, clear, and occur in advance of lessons beginning.

Setting High Expectations. Set and maintain high expectations for tutoring time. Discuss the expectations for voice level, behavior, transition time, materials, and teamwork during lessons.

Tutors
Please see our interactive and free Tutor Training Presentation.

Training Components for Cross-Age Tutors (i.e., the older buddy) should include:

- Introduction, modeling, and practice time for all lesson components in your cross-age tutoring program
- Behavioral expectations for tutor leadership
- Tips for supporting buddy (tutee) behavior
- Training on delivering specific feedback
- Opportunity to practice with paired tutee

Tutees
Please see our interactive and free Tutee Training Presentation.

Training Components for Cross-Age Tutees (i.e., the younger buddy) should include:
- Introduction to the Cross-Age Tutoring Program
- Discussion on and expectations for buddy behavior
- Opportunity to practice with paired tutor

Figure 2: Training Materials
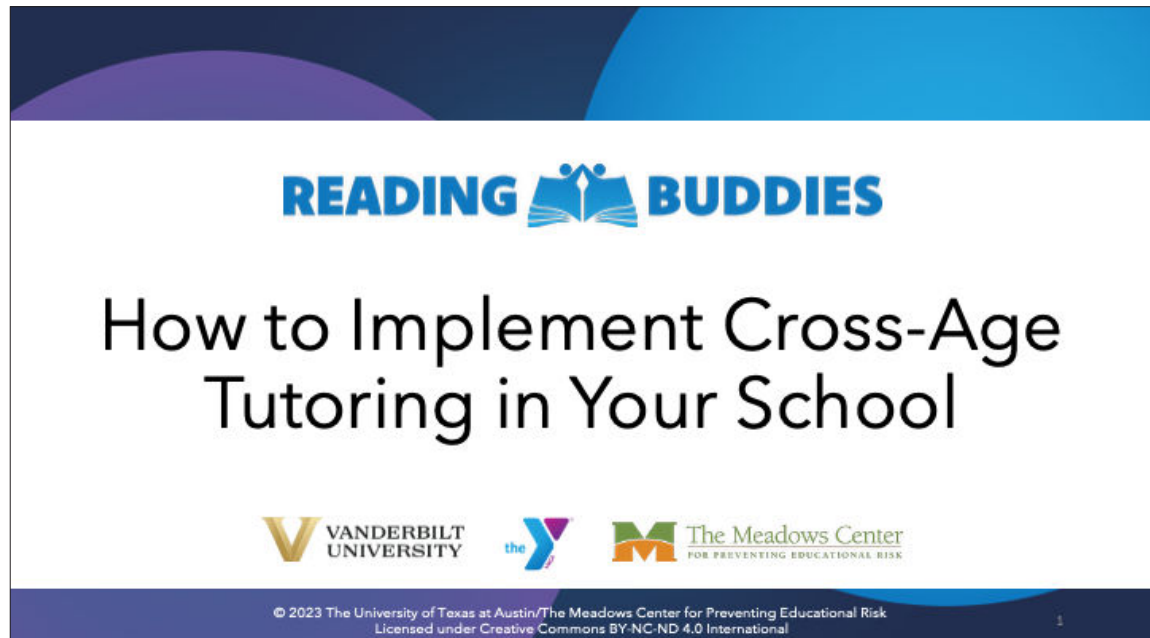
5 Student Participation

Now you are ready to begin cross-age tutoring! Below are a few tips to ensure you have an engaging daily tutoring routine where students can be as independent as possible.

Set and Maintain High Expectations

Remind tutors that they are leaders in your classroom and school. For all students, praise dyads that show strong teamwork and demonstrate positive attitudes. Make corrections for those who are not demonstrating the expected behavior during tutoring time. Do not let disruptive behaviors slide. Address student behavior quickly and consistently.

Choose Tutor Leaders

Choose two or three tutor leaders to guide the other tutors and remind peers of tutoring time, materials handling, and implementation procedures. In a prior study, tutor leaders were a key component in student buy-in and engagement (Swanson et al., 2023).

Provide Tutor and Tutee Cue Cards

Clear, simple, and visual directions are helpful reminders for all students. By providing tutors a tutees with their very own cue card, they can reference and remind themselves of the expectations and daily procedures.

Switch It Up

If your plans don't go according to plan or students seem fatigued, you can use the read aloud cue card. Have students select a book from the library or classroom and engage in a read aloud with their buddy.

Figure 3: Tutor and Tutee Cue Cards

Mauer & Swanson (2024)

6 Provide Support, Motivation, and Encouragement

When students are engaged in challenging academic tasks, support, motivation, and encouragement play a critical role in their success. Younger students may struggle with feelings of self-doubt, frustration, or mental fatigue when they encounter new or challenging material. Without encouragement, they may be more likely to give up or disengage from the work.

During cross-age tutoring lessons, a tutor can create a supportive environment for their tutee by

- providing positive reinforcement,
- delivering specific feedback,
- breaking tasks into manageable steps, and
- helping their tutee recognize their own progress.

Motivation can help students stay invested in the learning process, especially when the task feels hard.

To support, motivate, and encourage students, we provide the following two tools in this toolkit.

First, a **lesson log** where students get to monitor their progress, which is a research-based method to encourage motivation. After 10 lessons, students can be rewarded with a prize.

Figure 4: Sample Lesson Log

Second, **certificates** that recognize students' behavior. Certificates congratulate students on behaviors such as demonstrating good teamwork or a growth mindset. Certificates can be printed on cardstock or made into stickers. Hand these out as often as possible to recognize deserving students' hard work.

Figure 5: Sample Certificate
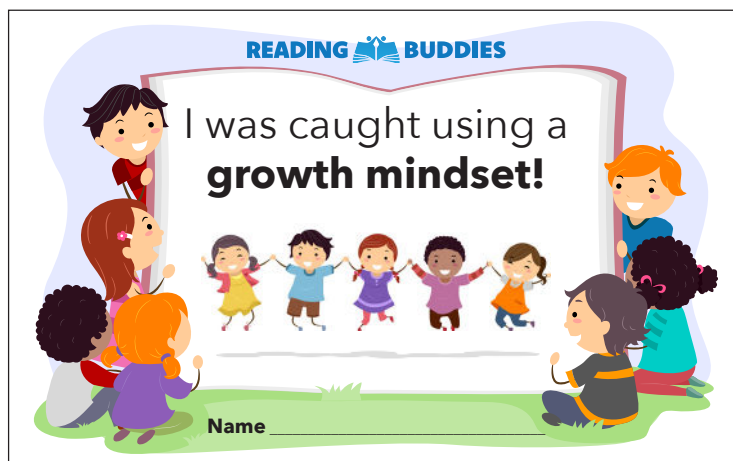
With these simple steps, you are on your way to implementing a successful and engaging cross-age tutoring program that supports all learners.

Additional Resources

Visit out Teachers Pay Teachers page at https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/store/the-meadows-center-for-preventing-educational-risk

Check out our social media for more information!

- Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/MCPER.EDU
- X: https://x.com/MCPER_EDU

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